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P O R T F O L I O



© MICHAL CHELBIN

"Natasha,
Ukraine,
2005," by
Michal
Chelbin.

A STUDY IN THREE PARTS

THE NEW PORTRAIT

MICHAL CHELBIN

THE HIGH-CONTRAST PORTRAIT

Here: "Two Matadors, Ukraine, 2005."
Opposite: "Young Cadets, Russia, 2004."



© MICHAL CHELBIN (2)



Like a talented painter, Michal Chelbin creates portraits that eloquently speak a language of contrasts—between shadow and highlight, as well as the dark and light sides of life.

For her recent *Strangely Familiar* series, which chronicles Eastern European circus performers, Chelbin says she "tried to focus on the real person and not the mask." This tension between what we expect from her subjects and how they actually appear—usually with a disarming, dissatisfied stare—has prompted frequent comparisons to the work of Diane Arbus.

Chelbin, who was born and raised in Israel but now lives in New York City, began photographing Russian immigrants in Israel's big circus shows six years ago. As the project progressed, she traveled to Russia and Ukraine, photographing smaller shows in rural towns. A few years

into the project, Chelbin also moved into the realm of color, sometimes re-creating pictures she'd taken previously in black and white.

"I am always fascinated to see the contrast between vivid costumes with gray surroundings," she explains. In one image, a young girl, dressed in a hot-pink leotard and tutu, stands demurely in front of four coal miners desaturated by soot.

In fact, many of Chelbin's muses are preteen girls and boys, often costumed prematurely in the raiment of adulthood. "I like to focus on this age between innocent and experienced," she says.

This liminality draws the viewer into Chelbin's portraits. And it helps explain the attention her work has garnered, including three honors from the National Portrait Gallery's Schweppes Photographic Portrait Prize and an Aperture book on *Strangely Familiar* planned for 2008. —M.J.

